

Water beneath Straw: Adventures of a Prophetic Phrase in the Mari Archives

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The god Dagan of Terqa sends Zimri-Lim of Mari a message through a prophetess. Three different officials—the majordomo Sammetar, the priestess Inibshina, and the future Terqa governor Kibri-Dagan (via his son Kanisan)—convey this message to the king. Except for the statement “beneath straw runs water,” however, each message reads differently from the other, and in this study I explain why. I also suggest a reason for the fact that Zimri-Lim did not follow Dagan’s admonition.

In the study of the contexts, styles, and practitioners of ancient Near Eastern prophecy, whether as a goal in itself or as background to a better understanding of Hebrew prophecy, the archives recovered from Mari have deservedly received major attention. Among the documents recovered from the Old Babylonian palace, there were a number of letters that included divinely inspired messages intended for King Zimri-Lim, a contemporary of Hammurabi of Babylon.¹ In this essay, offered in tribute to a beloved colleague and an erstwhile teacher in my community

1. A useful recent overview that includes a bibliography is found in H. Huffmon, *ABD* 5.477–82. J.-M. Durand has collated, reedited, and enlarged the corpus of Mari letters with prophetic contents in a chapter of his 1988 book, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* 1/1 (*ARM* 26; Paris, 1988) 377–452. Other documents in the archives that have prophetic contents are nos. 346 and 371 in *Archives épistolaires de Mari* 1/2 (ed. D. Charpin et al.; *ARM* 26). Another example is now treated in J.-M. Durand, “Le Combat entre le Dieu de l’orage et la Mer,” *MARI* 7 (1993) 43–47. Gripping as the evidence of Mari prophecy may be for students of the Bible, it should nevertheless be kept in mind that gods also channeled their wills through dreams and visions. At Mari, however, none of the preceding methods for learning the will of the gods was as highly regarded for its reliability as omens obtained by reading the livers of sacrificed animals; through inspection of fetuses (anomalous [*izbum*]; aborted [*iZ²um*]) and observation of astronomical oddities, natural phenomena (earthquakes, fire from heaven), and atypical meteorology (rain during summer, hail without rain, thunder without rain).

(Syrian Jews of Brooklyn), I want to focus on one prophecy, delivered by a single divine messenger but communicated to the king by at least three different Mari personalities, two high officials and a priestess. I want to suggest a reason for the fact that the language of one transmission differed from the other and that Zimri-Lim did not follow the will of Dagan, the source of the prophecy.

During the eighth month of Zimri-Lim's sixth or seventh year on the throne of Mari, Lupakhum, an *apilum* ('mouthpiece') of Dagan, went on an errand for his king, who was then at Saggatum.² We learn about it from a letter that Sammetar, then in charge at Mari, wrote the king (ARM 26 199):³

Lupakhum, Dagan of Tuttul's *apilum*, arrived here from Tuttul. He reported the information my lord entrusted to him, "Investigate for me (the oracles) before Dagan of Terqa." When he carried this message, he was given the following answer:

Wherever you go, happiness will constantly greet you. Battering ram and siege-tower are given to you; they will travel, as do companions, by your side.

These are the words they told him when in Tuttul.

No sooner did he arrive here from Tuttul than I had him escorted to Der so that he could carry my (door) bolt to the goddess Diritum. (Previously he had carried a *šernum* saying [to Diritum], "The *šernum* is not fastened and water will draw [it]. Reinforce the *šernum*."⁴) Now that he carried my (door) bolt, this is what was communicated (to the goddess Diritum):

2. See M.11436, cited by Durand, ARM 26/1 396: "1 shekel of silver, market weight, (given) to Lupakhum, the *apilum* of Dagan, when he went to Tuttul. Month 8, day 7, year: Zimri-Lim consecrated a throne to Shamash." In the list of Zimri-Lim years with a known sequence, this is the fourth. To obtain a setting in his actual tenure, an objective that is still under debate, I have added, not completely arbitrarily, two years to that number.

3. On the chronology of posts held by Sammetar, see provisionally Durand, ARM 26/1 574–75.

4. We note that twice in the document Sammetar speaks of 'my bolt' *sikkuri*. The only hint given about the meaning of the symbolism is in information that is itself obscure. Sammetar reminds the king that "previously, he took a *šernum*, saying [to Diritum! note verbal form in line 21], 'the *šernum* is not fastened and water will draw (it). Reinforce the *šernum*.'" The form *i-SU-up-pu* in this quotation (*pānānum šernam saniqma mū i-Su-uP-Pu šernam dunnuṇi*) should be a middle weak verb, hence connected to *sābum*, a verbing dealing with drawing water; but I do not know what *mū isubbū* means in the context. For *sanāqum*, said of bolts in line 20, see CAD S 140.

You may count on a peace treaty with the lord of Eshnunna and therefore have become negligent; however, your watchmen should be strengthened more than previously.

Speaking to me,⁵ this is what he said,

The king may be planning to take a binding oath with the lord of Eshnunna without consulting God. This will be like the previous occasion, when the Benjaminites came down to settle in Saggaratum. Did I not tell the king, “Do not make covenants with the Benjaminites;⁶ I shall send them among the . . .⁷ their clans and God River will finish them off for you”? Now then, without consulting God, he ought not to take a binding oath.

Lupakhum spoke these words to me. Later, the next day in fact, a *qammātum*-woman of Dagan of Terqa came here to tell me:

Beneath straw runs water. To make peace, they are constantly writing you and sending you their gods, but in their hearts they devise an entirely different “wind.” The king must not take a binding oath without consulting God.

She requested and I gave her a *lakharum*-garment and a *şerretum*-broach. By the way, she gave Inibshina the high priestess her message at the temple of the goddess Belet-ekallim. Now I am sending to my lord all these messages that were reported to me. My lord should consider them and act according to his royal majesty. With regard to Yanşib-Dagan, the soldier from Dashran whose head my lord ordered me to cut off, straightaway I sent Abi-epukh and when this man could not be found, Abi-epukh took his household and personnel into slavery. However, the next day a letter from Yasim-Dagan reached me saying that this

5. Durand has Lupakhum speak to Diritum. Charpin holds a position similar to mine; see his “Contexte historique et géographique des prophéties dans les textes de Mari,” *Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 23 (1992) 21–31.

6. Literally: “to kill a donkey foal’ of the Benjaminites.” It is not at all clear whether the animal was slaughtered, as in Hebrew *śāḥat*, or killed by breaking its neck, as in Hebrew *‘āraḥ*, referring to a heifer killed for communal atonement for an unsolved murder. Charpin has published two versions of a letter that contain major testimony (and discrepancies) on this practice, one sent to the king and another to his private secretary, “Un Souverain éphémère en Ida-maraş: Išme-Addu of Ašnakkum,” *MARI* 7 (1993) 185–87.

7. *Ina Bu hu Bu-ur-re-e qinnātisunu aṭarrassunūti* is a difficult phrase, because its second word is not attested elsewhere. Depending on which of its three initial signs is regarded as superfluous, it could be read {*BU*} *huburrê* (Durand) or *buḥurrê*. *Qinum* normally refers to ‘clan, family’ when in the feminine plural (as here) but refers to ‘nests’ when in the masculine plural. The verb *ṭarādum* is most commonly construed with animate objects as direct objects. Durand renders, “Je les (r)enverrai au milieu du dispersement de leurs nids. . . .”

man had just arrived there. My lord should now give me some indication of whether or not I should release his personnel.

This letter can be set within a fairly well understood context. No sooner had Zimri-Lim come to rule Mari than he was forced to battle the Benjaminites, a cluster of tribes that moved in and out of Mari territory. The struggle became even more dangerous to the stability of the new king's throne, especially because Eshnunna, a major power to the south of Mari, was supporting the tribal leaders. Zimri-Lim did succeed in defeating the tribes and was now contemplating accepting the peace overtures of Ibalpiel II, king of Eshnunna.⁸ Let us inspect Sammetar's letter closely.

"Investigate for me (the oracles) before Dagan of Terqa," Zimri-Lim had asked Lupakhum. Lupakhum, however, stopped at Tuttul on the Balikh, where its own Dagan charged him to tell the king, "Wherever you go, happiness will constantly greet you. Battering ram and siege-tower are given to you; they will travel, as do companions, by your side." This report, then, was not of peace, but of war successfully negotiated.

Thus armed, Lupakhum traveled southward toward Mari. It is curious that we do not read that Lupakhum stopped at Terqa to petition Dagan, as bid by his king; but it remains possible that visiting Tuttul fulfilled this requirement. Lupakhum did not linger long at Mari. He took from Sammetar a bolt (whether real or decorative, we do not know)⁹ and journeyed a day or so to a provincial town, Der, where the goddess Diritum resided. Whatever its symbolic value, the bolt seems to have had its effect on Lupakhum, for we find him admonishing the goddess: "You may count on a peace treaty with the lord of Eshnunna," he tells her, "and therefore have become negligent; however, your watchmen should be strengthened more than previously."

The wording of Lupakhum's admonition to Diritum is strikingly reminiscent of warnings that the gods repeatedly sent to Zimri-Lim; it may well be meant to hit its target by bouncing off the goddess. Sammetar twice refers to the bolt as being his property, and if his previous post at Terqa is at all relevant here, the bolt may have become instrumental in a cosmological test of wills that, as we know from other prophetic documents in Durand's volume (ARM 26 196), included a striking apocalyptic vision in which Dagan judges Tishpak and finds him wanting.

8. This complex story is well rehearsed in D. Charpin, "Un Traité entre Zimri-Lim de Mari et Ibâl-pi-El II d'Ešnunna," in *Marchands, Diplomates et Empereurs: Études sur la civilisation mésopotamienne offertes à Paul Garelli* (ed. D. Charpin and F. Joannès; Paris, 1991) 139–66.

9. See above, n. 4. ARM 21 230:4 lists a lapis-lazuli bolt for a piece of jewelry.

Be that as it may, Lupakhum next turns to Sammetar. Obviously speaking for Dagan and to Zimri-Lim, he reminds him how Dagan had orchestrated the defeat of the Benjaminites and warns, “Without consulting God, [Zimri-Lim] ought not take a binding oath [to the king of Eshnunna].” Sammetar himself deems this warning so crucial to his message that he uses two versions of it to frame the valuable lesson that Zimri-Lim should be drawing from recent history.

What is remarkable about Lupakhum’s words as recorded by Sammetar is the absence of any clear indication that the *apilum* was echoing words that reached him through a dream, vision, or trance. In fact, in a long and complex letter that recalls multiple oracles, we miss unequivocal references to formulas such as “thus speaks the god such and such.” Moreover, not once is there any allusion to sending validating objects, such as fringes and hair from the clairvoyant, by which to enhance what is propitious or deflect what is sinister in a given prognostication. Dagan may well have had confidence in Lupakhum and may have trusted him to speak for him at many forums; yet on a decision with so much at stake, Zimri-Lim was being left to rely on Lupakhum’s *ex cathedra* statements.

Sammetar may have recognized Zimri-Lim’s dilemma over taking Lupakhum at his word, so he turns to a complementary prognostication. He writes, “Later, the next day in fact, a *qammātum*-woman of Dagan of Terqa came here to tell me: ‘Beneath straw runs water.’¹⁰ To make peace, they are constantly writing you and sending you their gods, but in their hearts they devise an entirely different ‘wind’. The king must not take a binding oath without consulting God.”

Notice how, as quoted, the god’s words never identify the ruler who is so full of cunning. To connect the miscreant with Ibalpiel, Zimri-Lim had to move backwards in the text, locating the relevant information only in Lupakhum’s twice-told warning. Had Zimri-Lim succumbed to such an obvious manipulation of mechanism, medium, and time, he might still have questioned the value of having to consult God, when God had just declared the potential ally to have had a conniving heart. Sammetar found it prudent, therefore, to shift the argument back to the *qammātum*. She has asked for handouts from the palace, he says of her, a sure sign that she feels her mission completed. If he had questions about

10. Whether to read the word *qammātum* or *qabbātum* is still at issue. See Durand, ARM 26/1 396 for diverse opinions, including his notion that *qammātum* is West Semitic for *kezertum*, a term referring to a type of female votaries distinguished for their piled-up hairdo. I have followed him here because of the spelling [qa-]am-ma-[tim] (genitive) in ARM 26 203:12'. It should be noted, however, that the “Mari” vocabulary for prophetic and divinatory personnel tends to divide among words related etymologically to ‘seeing’ or ‘speaking’, not ‘standing’, hence favoring *qabbātum* ‘spokeswoman’.

her message or its delivery, Sammetar assures the king, a fuller explanation would come from Inibshina, the priestess and (half-)sister of the king, to whom the *qammātum* delivered the same message (*wūrtum*) at the temple of Belet-Ekallim in Mari.

Inibshina's own report on the matter was published long ago in Dossin's ARM 10 (80 = 26 197). The *qammātum*'s utterance is the core of her letter: "The friendship of Eshnunna's king is false: beneath straw runs water. I will gather him into the net that he knots (or: I knot). I will destroy his city and will ruin his wealth, untouched since of old."¹¹

Inibshina enhances the urgency of this message by folding its words within two portions of an earlier oracle (*tērtum*)¹² that the goddess Annunitum communicated through Shelibum, a 'berdache' (*assinnu*, a gynepathic transvestite). For more details about the content of that particular oracle, Zimri-Lim had at hand a letter from Queen Shiptu (26 213),¹³ who also conveyed specimens of Shelibum's hair and garment. But Inibshina was not content to use Annunitum's words just to envelope those of Dagan of Terqa; rather, she used selected sentiments from them to shape a terse censure of her king's behavior: *kiām ešme ummami ana ramānišu ištānarrar; ana ramānika la taštānarrar* 'I have heard it said that he *scintillates* on his own. Stop doing that!'

Inibshina's harangue includes difficult language, but whatever was its precise meaning (the difficulty is in the verb *šitarruru*¹⁴), the conviction and confidence with which she delivers the *qammātum*'s message is nevertheless evident. Indeed, as we return to it, we are struck by the sharpness of its tone compared with what is given in Sammetar's version. True, both want Zimri-Lim to avoid entanglement, but whereas Sammetar's *qammātum* warns of an unnamed opponent's craftiness and advises oracular consultation, Inibshina's *qammātum* is specific about Eshnunna's duplicity. However, she leaves Zimri-Lim no room to maneuver, for Dagan will already have destroyed Ibalpiel. Both Inibshina and Sammetar cite

11. Durand reads line 19: {ŠU} *šulputam ušalpat*. I am reminded of an OB passage cited in AHw 1269b: *mātu lā šulputtu ušalpat*. See also CAD L 92.

12. For usage of this term, see Durand, ARM 26/1 379–80.

13. Previously edited as ARM 10 7.

Three days ago, in the temple of Annunitum, Shelibum went into a trance. Said Annunitum, "Zimri-lim, you will be tested through an uprising! Protect yourself by bidding loved and trustworthy servants to stand by you. Don't move about alone. As to those who test you, I will hand them over to you."

Durand (ARM 26/1 424) thinks that Inibshina is referring to 26 198. But the latter is hardly a prophecy.

14. CAD Š/2 58–59 (sub *šarāru* C) renders, "I have heard the following, 'He continually moves about (?) by himself; you should not continually move about (?) by yourself.'"

the *qammātum*'s apothegmatic assertion, "Beneath straw runs water." But, whereas in Sammetar's version it requires a commentary to give it full sense, in Inibshina's account the aphorism reinforces Ibalpiel's character flaw. It has become, therefore, a moral indictment on which to justify the program of destruction Dagan is preparing for Eshnunna. Finally, while in Sammetar's version the *qammātum*'s warning is perfectly prosaic, or at best tries to play on *šārum* 'wind' and *šarrum* 'king', the *qammātum* of Inibshina turns out to be a fine punster, enveloping the series of reversals awaiting Ibalpiel in a parosonantic play on *šāpal tibnim* (line 13) and on forms of *šulputum* (line 17).

If the letters of Sammetar and Inibshina left Zimri-Lim anxious about recovering Dagan's message, imagine how much more perplexed he must have been when not just one, but two more versions of essentially the same oracle reached him. Kibri-Dagan, who may have been Sammetar's son and who was probably writing from Terqa, very likely reported on the matter to the king, if not also to the king's private secretary Shunukhra-khalu. We know this because we have the letter the king received from Kibri-Dagan's "son" (real or otherwise), Kanisan, writing from Mari (ARM 26 202). Albeit without direct attribution, Kanisan cites his father's quotation of the *qammātum*'s iteration of Dagan's original words, and it too relies on the same adage, "beneath straw runs water":

My father Kibri-Dagan wrote to me in Mari, "I have heard what was told [in Dagan's temple]. This is what was said, 'Beneath straw runs water.' He came, my lord's god; he has handed him his enemies. Now, as before, the ecstatic broke out into repeated declamation." This is what Kibri-Dagan wrote me.

Here, the imagination of Kibri-Dagan (or of Kanisan?) is strikingly circumscribed, setting the events in past time and using an obvious play on *alākum* by which to expound on our phrase, "Beneath straw runs water. He came, my lord's god; he has handed him his enemies."¹⁵

Whatever the original language of Dagan's sermon, we are left with only its avatars to inspect, obviously tailored by the personality of each dispatcher: Sammetar, Inibshina, Kibri-Dagan, if not also the *qammātum*.¹⁶

15. Kanisan continues by advising the king to consult the omens and to offer sacrifice. The reference to the male ecstatic (*muḥḥum*) is likely about another incident altogether, although it is not impossible that by the time Kibri-Dagan heard of the oracle, its source had become garbled. The pun in this version is connective: *mū illakūlillākma ilum*.

16. If three messages about the same affair are not enough, there is also ARM 26 203. This is a badly preserved text with a few lines about a *qammātum* who, upon delivering an

Table of Textual Comparisons

ARM 26 199 (Sammetar)	ARM 26 197 (Inibshina)	ARM 26 202 (Kanisana)
<p><i>šapal in.nu.da (tibnim)</i> <i>mû illakû ana salimim</i> <i>ištanapparûnikkum</i> <i>ilišunu iṭrardûnikkum u</i> <i>šaram sanemma ina</i> <i>libbišunu ikappadû šarrum</i> <i>balum ilam išallu</i> <i>napištašu la ilappat</i></p>	<p><i>salimātum ša awil ešnunna</i> <i>daštumma šapal in.nu.</i> <i>da (tibnim) mû illakû u</i> <i>ana šetim ša ukassarû</i> <i>akammissu alšu uhallaq u</i> <i>makkuršu ša ištu aqdami la</i> <i>šulput[tu] ušalpat</i></p>	<p><i>šapal in.nu.da (tibnim)</i> <i>mû illakû illikma ilum ša bē-</i> <i>liya awilē ayyabišu ana</i> <i>qātišu umalli inanna</i> <i>¹⁸ muḥḥum kima pana-</i> <i>numma irṭub šitassam</i></p>
<p>Beneath straw runs water. They keep on writing you about peacemaking; they send you their gods, but in their hearts they devise an entirely different “wind.” The king must not take a binding oath without consulting God.</p>	<p>The friendship of Eshnunna’s king is false: beneath straw runs water. I will gather him into the net that he knots (or: I knot); I will destroy his city and will ruin his wealth, untouched since of old.</p>	<p>Beneath straw runs water. He came, my lord’s god; he has handed him enemies. (Now, as before, the ecstatic broke out into repeated declamation.)</p>

The quotations we have examined differ in every way but in their recall of a deceptively opaque phrase.¹⁷ Most scholars conjecture that the phrase “beneath straw runs water” is a warning against trickery; something like “still waters run deep” is one of its possible meanings.¹⁸ But

oracle, is clipped of hair and garment fringes, after which she is rewarded with clothing. There is nothing in the document about water running beneath straw, but it may well have been a letter from Shiptu herself.

17. Diverse proposals are gathered in A. Marzal, *Gleanings from the Wisdom of Mari* (Studia Pohl 11; Rome, 1976) 27–29. A. Finet (“Citations littéraires dans la correspondance de Mari,” *RA* 68 [1974] 31 and 42) has suggested that the imagery draws on brick-making technology. Straw is placed in pools of water before clay is added, and floating straw, he suggests, gives a false sense of security; but it is not clear to me how it does this. See also Finet’s review of Marzal in *BiOr* 35 (1978) 222. Straw remains in place when loaded on a ship that itself floats on running water. This is the case reported in M. 13096, a Mari letter written by the same Sammetar (cited by Durand, “La Cité-état d’Imar à l’époque des rois de Mari,” *MARI* 6 [1990] 46), but to concretize our phrase in this way would completely spoil the allusion.

18. In Akkadian the verb *alāku* construes with water readily (see CAD A/1 310 sub g) but hardly ever metaphorically. In Ugaritic it is said of ‘wadis [nḥl] flowing like honey’ (CTA 6 [UT 49] III 7, 13). In Hebrew *hālak* is commonly said of water, streams, rivers, and the sea, in some cases carrying more metaphoric sense than in others (see BDB, 232 sub 3; but Ezek 7:17, 21:12 [rsv 21:6] must be understood euphemistically). Other verbs are also used: *nāzal*, *yārad*,

such an interpretation depends too much on Inibshina's own setting for it. In actuality, *above running water there can only be moving straw*, and the moving straw would cause the rush of the water to be more obvious to the beholder.¹⁹ The phrase could also be an allegory, but we elucidate the saying no better by assigning roles to straw or to running water.

I have pored over biblical, talmudic, and classical literature and have found straw and water, when directly linked in the same context, to deal almost exclusively with the care and feeding of beasts of burden. Our phrase could be a "riddle" which, by definition, needs an exact key to unlock it; or it could be an "enigma" which, by implication, can never have enough levels of meaning.²⁰ One recalls what is said in Num 12:6–8, that God spoke to the prophets in "riddles" (*bēḥidôt*), except when addressing Moses.

I have two conclusions. First, whatever the *qammātum* said must have contained the phrase "beneath straw runs water," an expression that so baffled its hearers that, when they wrote to the king, they were uncharacteristically meticulous in reporting it. They quoted it accurately but also felt free to expound on it, offering their judgments to Zimri-Lim as if they were part of the *qammātum*'s discourse. This practice was common in the ancient Near East, where people who recorded *an orally delivered statement* did not feel obligated to register it in the precise form in which they heard it. As it reached different ears, the statement was shaped to suit the perspective of the hearer.²¹ This is why I think it would be fruitless for us to search beyond this particular phrase for an "original" among the three formulations.²²

šūb, nūs, ʿāzal. In Hebrew gnomic literature 'deep waters' (*mayim ʿamuqqim*) is a metaphor for limitless resources or for profundity when said of conversation (*dibrē pī-ʿiš*, Prov 18:4) and of 'stratagem/counsel/purpose' (*ʿēšā*, Prov 20:5). Especially in the second case, whether 'deep waters' implies guidance or trickery is unclear.

19. It is important to recognize the fact that in all the references the texts are speaking of 'straw' (= in.nu.da *tibnum*), not of 'grass' or 'reed', two substances that theoretically could remain motionless when water runs beneath them.

20. I owe the suggestion for the term *enigma* to J.-M. Durand.

21. The topic deserves fuller treatment elsewhere. It would be interesting to contrast the precision with which *written* statements were transmitted. In most cases, since written statements were read aloud by scribes to illiterate officials, in transmission they tended to receive the same treatment as orally delivered declarations. This is in sharp contrast to occasions on which a scribe was given a whole document (or an extract thereof) to insert in a letter. Whenever we are able to compare an original with the document from which it was copied or excerpted, we find minor differences in "spelling" (number of cuneiform signs with which to write a word), "punctuation" (use of conjunctions), "orthography" (allocation of signs per line), or occasionally even the use of verbal tenses.

22. As does S. Parker, "Official Attitudes towards Prophecy at Mari and in Israel," *VT* 43 (1992) 59–60. He selects Inibshina's version as the most "authentic."

Why did Zimri-Lim fail to act on Dagan's warning? I need not debate the ardor of his piety and his understanding of philology to speculate that the versions of the divine message analyzed above would not have communicated to the king what Dagan really wanted of him. Had he nonetheless chosen to act on any of the versions of the prophecy, as received, he would have had no means of verifying or validating it.

Yet Zimri-Lim proved himself a shrewd reader of character, for despite his peace with Eshnunna, the cast of correspondents remained true to him: Lupakhum and Inibshina continued to serve him deep into his reign. Before he died a few months later, Sammetar did what the king bade him and once fussily inquired on how properly to welcome Eshnunna's delegation. The peace with Eshnunna gained Zimri-Lim a necessary respite without losing Yamkhad's support. Within four years Mari joined a coalition that brought Eshnunna to its knees.

I am just as keen to promote the second conclusion. Mari documents that recall movements of visionaries or cite the words of gods may turn out, on closer inspection, to deliver better insights on Mari personalities than on Mari prophecy.